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WASHINGTON — Helicoptering workers into flooded counties in Mississippi, the government on July 10 wrapped up the first stage of the 2010 census, verifying the last of 145 million addresses in the United States.

Now comes the real work: counting the 310 million or so people behind all those doors, an operation of monumental complexity that Missourians will be closely watching.

Census officials say that their 10-year count next April could well be the most difficult ever, since home foreclosures from the recession, immigration and natural disasters — notably Hurricane Katrina — have reshaped communities.

Members of Congress already were worried, given a string of independent reports this year from the Government Accountability Office and others pointing out mismanagement at the Census Bureau and gigantic computer problems.

But just days after completing the address canvassing ahead of time, the bureau last week achieved a second key success when the Senate overcame objections from a few Republicans and finally confirmed Robert Groves, a University of Michigan survey research expert, as Census Bureau director.

With tens of millions of dollars in federal funding at stake and perhaps even the loss of a Missouri congressional seat possible, St. Louis officials are paying close attention to the constitutionally mandated count.

U.S. Rep. William Lacy Clay, D-St. Louis, said the arrival of Groves, a former Census Bureau official and a leader in his field, can help restore faith in the bureau. Clay is chairman of the House subcommittee that oversees the census.

"While far from complete, we are seeing signs of progress," Clay said. "The census is about three critical things — information, money and proper political representation. We cannot afford to come up short on any of them."

By Clay's estimates, Missouri is among slow-growth states "on the cusp" of losing a congressional seat. Census numbers also are used for redrawing legislative and aldermanic districts.

Besides the political clout at stake, billions of dollars are on the table. More than 180 federal programs factor census numbers into formulas that determine how nearly \$400 billion in federal money, from Medicaid to highway repair funds, is parceled out.

CENSUS REFLECTIONS

St. Louis officials have good reason to stay abreast of planning for next year's census: The city has been perennially undercounted of late in the annual updated survey of larger cities and counties.

For five years running, St. Louis has challenged those results and in four straight years won. The most recent challenge is pending.

In December, after the city's complaints, the Census Bureau revised the 2007 population count to 355,663 from 350,759.

Mayor Francis Slay said he sees a need to be constantly vigilant. He noted that even his deputy mayor for development, Barbara Geisman, wasn't counted recently because her downtown residence was mistakenly omitted from the official list of addresses.

Slay, who has counseled other mayors on mounting challenges, said he was told by the Census Bureau that each uncounted person translates to the loss of as much as \$1,000 per year. So an undercount of 1,000 people would mean the loss of as much as \$10 million over the period of the decennial census.

It's about more than money and political clout, Slay added. "People look at the census results and trends as objective measures of success," he said. "Cities showing a decline in population are looked at less favorably.

"But if your population is on the increase, people look at you as a city on the move."

Jamie Alderslade is outreach director at the Social Compact Inc., a Washington nonprofit group that works with cities to gather data for the Census Bureau with the goal of increasing investment in inner cities.

Alderslade observed that retailers, banks and many sorts of businesses rely heavily on census data when making investments. But undercounted cities typically get ignored for business expansion, he said, adding, "We have demonstrated that many neighborhoods are much larger, with greater buying power and safer than was thought."

'NOT AMERICA OF 2000'

The Census Bureau acknowledges its historic problem of undercounting low- and moderate-income communities and overcounting richer suburbs. How does it happen? In short, prosperous communities are more stable and easier to count than neighborhoods where the population may be in flux.

Avoiding undercounts is among many challenges confronting the government in this survey. Exploding costs could raise the price of the count from an estimated \$11.5 billion to as high as \$14.5 billion, the Congressional Research Service observed in April.

Part of the higher price tag results from the need to hire more employees to make up for a disastrous experiment with handheld computers. The devices were to be used for follow-up operations after distribution of the new, 10-question questionnaire. But the devices proved to be so unreliable in testing that they will be stacked in a Washington-area warehouse next spring rather than be in the hands of census workers.

Arnold Jackson, the Census Bureau's associate director, said in an interview that the newly completed address verification phase involving 140,000 workers went according to plans. The handheld devices worked even though his agency is sticking to its plan to abandon them next spring in favor of old-fashioned paper.

In an effort to count everyone, Jackson said, the bureau plans a \$260 million ad campaign supplemented by more than 40,000 groups spreading the word about the need to be counted.

Jackson has an appreciation of trends in St. Louis, having visited the city six months ago. He noted St. Louis' aggressiveness in challenging the Census Bureau and said his office will be working closely with officials in the region leading up to the count.

Sizing up the challenge, he observed that "St. Louis has some hollowing out of its industrial base, and a rich mix of races and ethnicities, including the largest Bosnian community in the United States. Those are the realities we will face in 2010. This is not the America of 2000."